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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examines how practicing teachers perceive the function and use of study guides in their content area classrooms. Subjects, 21 students in a graduate content area reading course and 14 cooperating teachers in field experience settings for students enrolled in an equivalent undergraduate course, completed a forced-choice and open-ended questionnaire. The subjects represented teachers from a broad range of content areas, grade levels, and classroom experience. Results seemed to indicate that teachers are not only concerned that students learn from content material but that teachers also recognize the importance of developing students' higher level thinking skills. Results also indicated that while the majority of teachers used study guides as a way of guiding their students' reading, the less experienced teachers were just as convinced that their purpose was to help students study for tests. (Two tables of data are included.) (RS)

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Running Head: Use of Study Guides

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PRACTICING TEACHERS' USE OF STUDY GUIDES IN CONTENT AREA CLASSROOMS

Although the consensus among reading educators and researchers is to advocate the explicit instruction of reading, thinking, and study skills in content area classrooms (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Herber, 1978; Smith & Feathers, 1983b; Vacca & Vacca, 1989), most preservice and inservice teachers resist the role of teaching anything perceived as being outside the realm of their subject-field expertise (O'Brien, 1988; Ratekin et al., 1985; Smith & Feathers 1983a;). In fact, a recent U.S. survey of reading instruction in middle schools revealed that less than 18% of the schools reported having or planning a content area reading program (Gee & Forester, 1988).

Despite their resistance to teach skills related to helping students understand and learn from content area material, many teachers acknowledge the difficulties their students encounter in content area textbooks (Anderson et al., 1985; Rieck, 1977; Vacca & Vacca, 1989). Complicated or poorly explained concepts, sophisticated vocabulary, confusing text structure, and insufficient links to background knowledge may contribute to students' difficulties (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984). Nevertheless, secondary teachers expect students to read entire textbooks and complete more independent homework assignments than do elementary teachers (Davey, 1988).

This raises the question of just how students are coping with the difficult task with which they are confronted. How are teachers

helping their students read, study, and remember material from content area texts?

Within the last two decades, the usefulness of study guides (or reading guides) has surfaced in the literature (Herber, 1978; Tutolo, 1977; Vacca & Vacca, 1989). These tools or "adjunct instructional materials" (Vacca & Vacca, 1989) are designed to help simplify difficult texts which students might otherwise avoid using.

As part of a planning grant funded by the Center for Urban Research in Education, we began looking at how practicing teachers perceive the function and use of study guides in their content area classrooms. With the information gathered in this exploratory study, we hope to identify areas of need which will culminate in a larger teacher-training study on the effects of planning and implementing the use of study guides for at-risk students in urban and suburban communities.

METHOD

Subjects

For the present sub-study, 35 practicing teachers from urban and suburban classrooms in the Greater Portland area were asked to complete a forced choice and open ended questionnaire. 21 were students in a graduate content area reading course. The remaining 14 were cooperating teachers in field experience settings for students enrolled in an equivalent undergraduate course. The subjects represent teachers from a range of content areas (with the exception

of music and history) and grade levels. A wide range of experience is also represented (from 1-34 years of classroom teaching).

Materials

A twenty four item questionnaire was designed to address the following research questions: (1) How do teachers define study guides? (2) What are their purposes for using them? and (3) How do they use study guides with their students?

The researcher-designed questionnaire consists of four multiple choice items (with the option for teachers to write in their own responses) to theoretical questions which address research questions #1 and #2. Nine forced-choice items address more practical issues (Research Question #3) revealing how often teachers use study guides, explain their purpose, and model their use. These items also explore the frequency of the use of study guides as independent tools, group tools, or vehicles for whole class or small group discussions. We were also interested in knowing how often writing assignments are used in conjunction with study guides. For these 9 items, teachers were asked to specify their use as follows: daily, 2-3 times per week, weekly, occasionally, or not at all.

The remaining items were open-ended questions which were designed to probe the teachers' beliefs and practices concerning evaluation of the effectiveness of their study guides. Demographic data were also collected in order to explore the degree to which experience and/or content area affected their responses on the items.

Procedure

The 21 teachers who were students in a graduate content area reading course were given the questionnaire during a class session and asked to complete and return it within two weeks. Course content at this time had not included any information which would have influenced their answers. The remaining 14 teachers received the questionnaire from undergraduate students in a content area reading course who had been placed in their classrooms for field experience assignments. These students explained the purpose of the questionnaire, asked teachers to complete the survey, and collected them within two weeks.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the proportion of responses to theoretical questions across all the surveyed teachers, by content area groups (language, sciences, and other), and by experience (L.exp.=1-5 years; Exp.=6-34 years).

Insert Table 1 About Here

Results of Table 1 indicate that most teachers view study guides as a tool for encouraging thinking at different levels (29%) or as an aid to learn or study material (31%). As a group, experienced

teachers tended to circle more than one option, write in "all of the above," or write in responses which describe their study guides as multifaceted. Their design and use was described as being dependent on the subject area or the skill to be learned. Framed outlines, "self-questioning," journal writing with "prereading hypothesizing," charts, "organizers," and terminology sheets were listed as potential instruments.

Most of the respondents who felt that study guides should be used to help students study for tests were less experienced teachers. By contrast, the majority of more experienced teachers (60%) report their purpose for using study guides as one of guiding students' reading. Regardless of experience or content area, 40% of our teachers indicated that their purpose for using study guides was to guide their students' reading of the material. Regarding their sources for creating study guides, 71% of all the respondents claimed they create their own study guides. A larger proportion of less experienced teachers use commercial materials than experienced teachers (20% versus 7%), who tend to create their own or rely on a variety of sources.

Table 2 reveals the proportion of responses to more practical questions including how often study guides are used, whether students are trained in their use, and how they are used (individually, as whole class discussion aids, in conjunction with writing, etc.). The number of categories regarding frequency was collapsed from 5 to 3 ("daily", "2-3 times per week", and "weekly" were combined to create

the category "at least once a week") in order to reflect a more realistic picture of teachers' patterns. (Note: A better division might have been "at least once a week," "at least twice a month," "monthly," "occasionally," and "never.")

Insert Table 2 About Here

Results of Table 2 reveal that 62% of all respondents use study guides at least once a week. All of the remaining teachers use them at least occasionally. A higher proportion of language teachers and experienced teachers use study guides more often than those from the comparison groups. Only a small percentage of teachers fail to either explain the purpose for study guides (8%) or model their use (6%). High percentages of teachers have students use study guides independently at least once a week (60%), as well as have them occasionally helping each other (52%). 91% of all respondents say they use study guides as a basis for whole class discussions. Although 79% of the respondents use study guides in conjunction with writing assignments at least occasionally, 21% never incorporate writing with the guides. Most of these are less experienced teachers. As a group, language teachers use written assignments with study guides far more than teachers in other content areas (100% versus 66% and 50%).

A qualitative analysis of open ended questions suggests that most teachers check the effectiveness of their study guides by testing, through informal observation of discussions, by questioning, and sometimes through writing. Language teachers and experienced teachers are more likely to test the efficacy of their study guides than are those from the comparison groups. One teacher explains that, "if they stimulate questions, discussion and writing, they work."

Finally, teachers across content areas tend to agree that study guides should vary as a function of different content material and various learning needs. Some had strong opinions regarding their content area subject matter. For example, one veteran biology teacher asks, "How can students learn very different subjects (philosophy, English, biology, mathematics) in the same way? The idea is extremely limited." Additionally, many teachers feel that study guides should include different formats, different study strategies, and account for learning differences. Language teachers seem to feel that higher level thinking skills should be taught regardless of content area while recognizing the importance of learning about differing text structures. One teacher recommends a "generic one, like what do you know, what do you need to know, and what do you want to know? However, texts and text structures differ and learning designs need to be appropriate to the task."

DISCUSSION

The results of this sub-study seem to indicate that teachers are not only concerned that students learn from content material but that teachers also recognize the importance of developing students' higher level thinking skills. Since experienced teachers tend to view study guides as multifaceted, that is, designed to meet a specific content area goal or skill development, it might be useful to test the efficacy of their study guides as compared to those used by less experienced teachers. It would also be of interest to note the qualitative differences in the design of study guides by these two groups of teachers, especially given the fact that inexperienced teachers tend to use commercial guides more often than experienced teachers.

While the majority of teachers in our sample use study guides as a way of guiding their students' reading, we found it interesting that less experienced teachers were just as convinved that their purpose was to help students study for tests. It might be the case that experience leads one to understand that study guides can help students deal with the difficulties presented in many content area texts and perhaps that creating one's own study guides which are matched to the content and/or text structure might also be effective. Additionally, helping teachers test the efficacy of their study guides, as both the experienced and the language teachers in this study tend to do, might be an important step in diagnostic teaching.

The responses to questions presented in Table 2 provide a wealth of information addressing the question of how teachers use study guides in their classrooms. Among the more interesting findings are how frequently teachers report using study guides, both as a part of ongoing class assignments, as well as providing the basis for whole class discussion. Although there is evidence that teachers resist presenting specific lessons which might help students process and remember content area reading material (Smith & Feathers, 1983a; Rieck, 1977), a majority of teachers in our study indicate that they use study guides specifically for that purpose. If the sample used in this study is representative of content teachers in general, then it appears that the use of study guides is perhaps the primary means for helping students deal with some of the difficulties presented by content area texts.

Given the exploratory nature of this sub-study, further research should include actual classroom observations similar to but larger in scope than those of Smith and Feathers (1983a) in order to validate these findings. It should include a larger sample size, include all content areas, and explore differences in teachers' use of study guides with various social-cultural subgroups, as well as those from a range of ability levels.

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Table 1: Proportion of teachers' responses to theoretical questions

Survey questions and response choices	Across teachers N=35	By content area Lang. N=13	Sci. 12	Other 10	By number of years L.exp. N=20	Exp. 15
1. Definition:						
A. A tool which encourages thinking at different levels	.29	.31	.25	.20	.35	.20
B. Course outline/syllabus	.14	.00	.25	.20	.10	.20
C. A list of questions	.11	.08	.08	.20	.10	.13
D. Any aid to learn/study text material	.31	.31	.33	.20	.40	.20
E. Other	.14	.31	.08	.20	.05	.27
2. Purpose:						
A. To study for tests	.17	.08	.17	.40	.25	.07
B. To preview material	.11	.00	.08	.20	.15	.07
C. To guide reading	.40	.54	.42	.20	.25	.60
D. To supplement class material	.09	.08	.08	.10	.15	.00
E. Other	.23	.31	.25	.10	.20	.27
3. Source:						
A. Commercial materials	.11	.15	.00	.30	.20	.07
B. Inservice handouts	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
C. College courses	.11	.15	.00	.20	.15	.07
D. Other teachers	.03	.00	.00	.10	.05	.00
E. Other (self-created)	.71	.69	1.00	.40	.60	.87

Table 2: Proportion of teachers' responses to practical questions

Survey questions and response choices	Across teachers N=35	By content area Lang.	Sci.	Other	By number of years L.exp.	Exp.
1. I use study guides						
A. At least once a week	.62	.69	.58	.50	.55	.67
B. Occasionally	.40	.31	.42	.50	.45	.33
C. Not at all	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
2. I explain the purpose						
A. At least once a week	.28	.38	.33	.20	.25	.33
B. Occasionally	.68	.62	.58	.70	.75	.67
C. Not at all	.08	.00	.08	.10	.00	.00
3. I demonstrate their use						
A. At least once a week	.18	.23	.25	.30	.40	.07
B. Occasionally	.68	.77	.67	.60	.50	.93
C. Not at all	.06	.00	.08	.10	.10	.00
4. Students use study guides independently						
A. At least once a week	.60	.69	.55	.55	.56	.67
B. Occasionally	.36	.31	.45	.33	.39	.33
C. Not at all	.03	.00	.00	.11	.06	.00
5. Students help each other						
A. At least once a week	.42	.46	.36	.55	.39	.47
B. Occasionally	.52	.54	.55	.33	.61	.53
C. Not at all	.06	.00	.09	.11	.00	.00
6. I use study guides as the basis for whole class discussions						
A. At least once a week	.45	.54	.33	.40	.50	.33
B. Occasionally	.46	.31	.58	.60	.45	.47
C. Not at all	.11	.15	.08	.00	.05	.20
7. ...as the basis for small group discussions						
A. At least once a week	.26	.38	.18	.10	.20	.33
B. Occasionally	.40	.23	.27	.70	.40	.40
C. Not at all	.34	.38	.55	.20	.40	.27
8. ... in conjunction with writing assignments						
A. At least once a week	.24	.46	.08	.10	.11	.40
B. Occasionally	.55	.54	.58	.40	.61	.47
C. Not at all	.21	.00	.33	.50	.28	.13